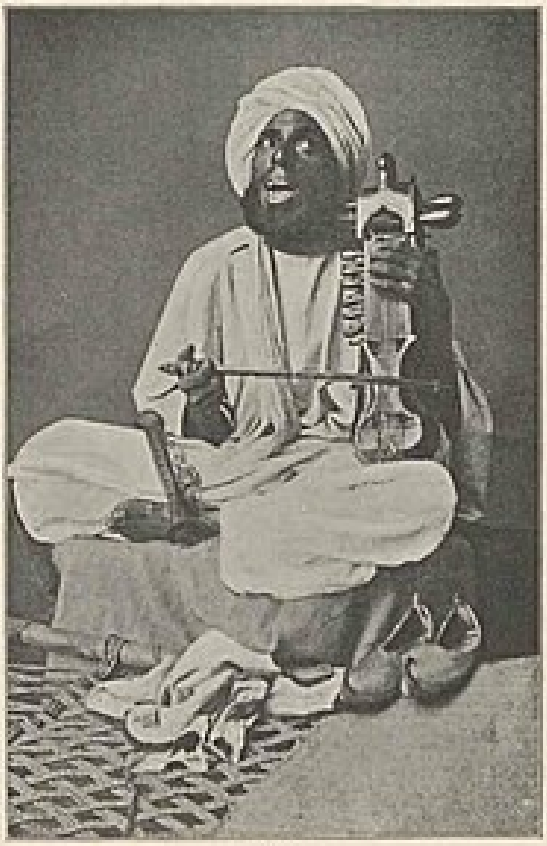
Mirasis of Punjab



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Mirasis of Punjab:

An entertaining community bows out, slowly and surely

It's been difficult going for (from left) Desraj Lachkani, son Surjit and grandson Armaan.

Renu Sud Sinha

A syncretic community of entertainers and artistes amalgamating Hindu, Muslim and Sikh influences and practices, the Mirasis have been carrying forward Punjab's ancient folk traditions, particularly folk theatre, for centuries. The most notable historic name from the community has been of Bhai Mardana, a minstrel with Guru Nanak.

The artistes from the community that includes sub-genres like Naqqals and Bhands have always been multi-talented — they would sing, play music, act, mimic, dance, tell stories and do comedy. Any ceremony, happy or sad, or festive occasion, they performed for their patrons and public alike.

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Khushi Mohd’s Naqqal group performs regularly.

These folk entertainers were a significant part of everyday life, especially in villages, says Punjabi author Hardial Singh Thuhi, who has penned many books on the subject.

"Every village supported a few Bhand and Naqqal families, who would not only entertain people every evening but would also distribute invites for joyous or sad occasions, besides doing odd jobs. The villagers would pay them in kind every harvest season. Many royal families also provided patronage to Mirasis. During performances, they would also get 'vel' (money as token of appreciation). They were in a sizeable number in the Malwa and Doaba areas. Many Muslim Mirasis stayed back in Malerkotla during Partition because of the royal family's protection," adds Thuhi.

After Independence, as a new nation started rebuilding, adopting industrialisation and modernising its agrarian economy, Mirasis were left behind. It marked the beginning of the community's slow decline, says Kulbir Kaur Virk,

assistant professor, performing arts, Lovely Professional University.

The death knell came with the Green Revolution, says Thuhi. “In the rural ecosystem, most communities were inter-dependent. Prosperity brought self-dependence. Many artisans like potters, ironsmiths and carpenters suffered as a result of mechanisation. Mirasis were the worst affected,” says the author.

Most Mirasis are exceptional singers. As audiences declined, many concentrated on singing, a skill they were born with. Many of the renowned qawwals and folk singers such as Wadali brothers, Ustad Puran Shah Koti (who is the guru of Hans Raj Hans and Jasbir Jassi) and Koti’s son Master Saleem, who has sung for many Hindi films, belong to the community.

Cinema and TV further impacted the dwindling audience, says Pritam Rupal, secretary, Punjab Sangeet Natak Akademi. “It’s an endangered art now,” he adds.

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Folk musician Desraj Lachkani, known more for his 'Jugni' in ' Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!', bears testimony to the winds of change. Born Taj Mohammad, his family migrated in I947 from Lahore and took the name of the Patiala village where they settled. His grandson Armaan is a third-generation singer, part of Desraj's Dhad jatha that also performed at 'Coke Studio' in 2012. Awards and fame have not translated into prosperity or even sustenance. "The audiences are not keen to listen to stories of old times," says the old singer.

Armaan (32), a graduate, tried for other jobs but had to fall back on his legacy. "When we sing about Heer-Ranjha, Mirza-Sahiban or Puran Bhagat, the elderly can relate but there have been times when the youth have jeered at us. At those times, I feel singing is majboori, worse than even begging," says the youngster in a forlorn voice.

"We do get bookings for weddings, etc," he adds. But at Rs 10,000-15,000, 50-60 annual events are not enough. "There has been no work

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for four months," says Armaan, who works as a daily-wager at a fruit shop.

With survival at stake and absence of any backing by music companies or producers, there is not enough money to create and market/promote new tracks, adds Armaan.

Khushi Mohammad's Naqqal group from Ghanaur, near Dhuri, has fared better. The 12-member family group, which includes his sixth generation, is booked solid between January and March; it also performs regularly at other events. "The North Zone Cultural Centre has invited our group to participate in folk theatre festivals in Delhi, Bhopal, Chandigarh, etc," says Salim, Khushi's son. Though they perform at around 90 events annually, they have to fall back on other jobs.

There is hardly any institutional or government effort, political will and even documentation about this dying art form and the community. Most experts rue the absence of a policy by the Punjab government that can help in the revival of vanishing practices. There have

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been efforts though. “The youth-festival circuit has come in handy,” says Jittu Saran, a Punjabi actor who has thrice won the gold medal for his Bhand performance and now trains Punjabi University teams. Panjab University, too, has been sending teams for Bhand competition for the past 15 years. This has also helped some artistes in sustaining. Armaan and his cousin Iqbal train singing teams of Punjabi University.

“Concerted efforts by the government and cultural bodies are needed to restore a sense of pride for their legacy,” says theatre director Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, who has been regularly working with Naqqals for her productions since 1986.

When Amritsar-based Rajinder Singh joined NSD in 2003, he was not aware of his own state’s folk theatre form. As repentance, he and his wife Amita Sharma, also an NSD alumnus, have been working since 2013 with the Bhand-Mirasi community to document and preserve this folk theatre form of Punjab. “I try to ensure regular work for them in my productions and

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have also taken them to various festivals," adds Rajinder.

Hope outweighs despair though. As Desraj Lachkani says, "Je koi bimaar hai, theek hon dee aas te rehndi hai (If someone's sick, the hope for recovery remains)."